

It was the late summer of 1989, and one day a package with a cassette inside appeared in the mail. The cassette was an advance copy of the new, as yet, unreleased Bob Dylan album, *Oh Mercy*. All I knew was the album was recorded in New Orleans with producer Daniel Lanois, whose work I mainly knew from the first Robbie Robertson album.

It was the second year of what would become known as the Never Ending Tour, a tour where anything could and did happen, and a tour that would eventually redefine Bob Dylan's entire career as a musician. The previous tours of the past few years had been with either the Grateful Dead and Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers. Both tours had their moments, but I left all those shows feeling something was missing, that Dylan needed his own band. The show with the Dead in Philly was to say the least controversial, and a lot of people were whining they'd never see him again. Back then, there were still disc-jockeys and radio stations that cared about music and their comments ranged from sort of sympathetic to what was that!?

For me, he played two songs I never thought I'd see, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," and even more amazingly, "John Brown," an anti-war song that appeared on an album I had, called *Broadside Volume 1*, which was a sampler of the topical songwriters of Greenwich Village in the early '60s. On that album Dylan appeared under the pseudonym Blind Boy Grunt, which turn out to be the first of many. "John Brown" was based on the traditional country song, "Reuben's Train," that had a definitive guitar lick to it, and Jerry Garcia, no stranger to traditional music used that lick in the arrangement. The show had two other surprises, "Chimes of Freedom" and "Queen Jane Approximately," and even though the latter song kind of collapsed in the middle, I didn't care. It happened to be my birthday, I was seeing Bob Dylan and saw songs I never thought I'd see. It was a hint of things to come.

When Dylan went on tour the following summer, it was with a stripped down band, and they were to say the least rocking. In those days there was no Internet to give you instant set lists each night. If you wanted to know what was going on a tour, you had to go to the library and find a newspaper from another town that hopefully reviewed the show. So when I saw my first Never Ending Tour show at the Garden State Arts Center, in Holmdel, New Jersey, and Dylan opened with Subterranean Homesick Blues, another song I never expected to see, my mind was somewhat blown and blown even further when during the short acoustic set, he pulled out Woody Guthrie's, "Trail of the Buffalo." That fall Dylan opened up his tour with two nights at the Tower Theater just outside Philly. I was beyond

belief when in the middle of the show he launched into “Bob Dylan’s 115<sup>th</sup> Dream,” and again two songs later, when he inserted a new verse about Vietnam into “With God On Our Side,” a verse that would appear a few months later on a Neville Brothers album, *Yellow Moon*, that was produced by Daniel Lanois.

The next morning, I was invited to watch a recording session with Dylan’s bass player at the time, Kenny Aaronson. When I arrived at the studio, my friend who was producing the session cautioned me, saying Bob was kind of mad at the band last night, so be cool. Finally at the end of the session when everyone was relaxed, I got up the nerve ask Aaronson, “Did you know Bob was gonna do 115<sup>th</sup> Dream last night?” “He kind of fooled around with it at sound check was the response.”

The following summer, the traditional songs were replaced by covers of other artists such as Gordon Lightfoot, Van Morrison and country singer Don Gibson. Knowing a new album was on the way, I was hoping for new songs, but it wasn’t to be.

And so I opened that envelope and put *Oh Mercy* on my tape deck. From the first note I knew it was a serious Bob Dylan album. Dylan’s two previous studio albums were comprised of covers and originals, recorded at various sessions and were far from having a cohesive feel. A lot of people felt his best work of the past few years was with The Traveling Wilburys. *Oh Mercy* wasn’t New Orleans R&B, it was Bob Dylan music. The sound was dense with layers of guitars, the production steamy. The songs were deep, dark and mysterious, some funny and some with anger brewing beneath the surface. In other words, everything you want in a Bob Dylan album. Immediately apparent, and perhaps best of all was that Lanois knew how to capture Bob Dylan’s voice at that time. Throughout his career, Bob Dylan has had a spooky intensity, that when it happens, can cuts right through you. It’s a magical thing. It cannot be defined or even named. It doesn’t always happen, but when it does, you know it and it’s on this album in abundance. After listening to the album, I called a friend heavily into Bob and said, “You have to hear this album.” Skeptical from the last two albums, he didn’t believe me. That night I went to see some friends play at a local bar and he was there. I walked in the bar, walked up to him and said, “Come out to my car right now.” I put on “Ring Them Bells,” “Most Of The Time,” and “Man In The Long Black Coat,” and watched his skepticism change to a smile.

When Dylan returned to the Tower Theater that fall, a few *Oh Mercy* song were in the set, but typically they sounded nothing like the

record, rougher, rawer, louder. "Most Of The Time" melded right into "All Along The Watchtower." There were surprises in store, but they weren't necessarily musical. At the end of the second night, Dylan did something I never thought I'd ever see. A crew member brought him a different microphone for his harp, and the band launched into "Leopard Skin Pill-Box Hat." During a harp solo, Dylan edged closer and closer to the lip of the stage, then jumped into the crowd still playing and ran out a side door ending the show.

When the tour resumed in 1990, with a three-set club show in New Haven Connecticut at Toad's Place, he debuted a new original song for the first time since 1981. That song was "Wiggle Wiggle." It was the last time a new original song would be debuted in concert. That show, a warm-up for the coming tour also included numerous covers songs that ranged from "Pretty Peggy-O," in a far different rendition than the one on his first album to various country songs to blues to Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing In The Dark." No one knew it at the time, but that show was a forecast of the decade to come.

Late that summer, another album *Under The Red Sky*, appeared. I was writing for a local weekly and much to the displeasure of my editor covered every Dylan show in and around Philly. Late that summer, I was contacted at the paper where I worked by Bob Dylan's publicity agent Elliot Mintz. Unfortunately, I was in the hospital, with a lot of broken bones, having been a robbery victim the night before. The day I was released from the hospital, a tape arrived in the mail from Mintz. It was *Under The Red Sky*. Produced by Don Was, it had a different sound and different feel than *Oh Mercy*. Was had a different production style than Lanois. Lanois, with a couple of exceptions provided Dylan with the same crew of musicians. Among other things, this enables a groove to happen, and once the musicians find that groove, then the sessions start to flow. While maintaining the same rhythm section, Was had different guitar players and keyboard players on each session.

Many of the tunes sounded like apocalyptic nursery rhymes and in a sense they were. It should be pointed out that many nursery rhymes were originally broadsides, sung or shouted in the streets and about topical issues, often mocking royalty. At roughly the same time, Dylan was also recording the second Traveling Wilburys album and touring. Following those two albums, Dylan concentrated on touring and it would seven long years before there was a new album of original Bob Dylan songs and two years, before there was another Bob Dylan album.

In 1992, with little advance notice or fanfare, a new album, *Good As I Been To You* appeared. It was Dylan alone doing old ballads, and blues, a pop song, and closing with the children's song, "Froggie Went A Courtin'." The production was minimal, the playing and singing, often rough. A little less than a year later, a similar album *World Gone Wrong*, was released. It seemed like a little more thought and care went into *World Gone Wrong*, from the song selection to the album cover, and of course the performance. For the first time since *Desire*, the album contained liner notes by Bob Dylan. Writing in a different, more linear, though still free-flowing style than he used previously, he wrote about the source of each song and at the same time managed to connect the songs with the current time. Curiously enough, for the first time, he directly addressed his fans, saying the Never Ending Tour ended with the departure of guitarist G.E. Smith in 1991, and then quite humorously naming all the subsequent tours. Nonetheless, fans continued and still continue to call it the Never Ending Tour. At that point in time, it almost seemed being a Dylan fan made you a part of some secret group. I had my friends who may have once listened to Dylan but stopped along the way, and I had my friends I shared Dylan with, which meant going to shows and trading bootlegs. When I went to England a few years later and attended a Dylan conference in Liverpool and took part in some other related Dylan activities, a friend of the friend I was staying with asked me with total seriousness, "Are you part of the Dylan underground?" It cracked me up.

In the mid-'90s, that all would change with the Internet. A friend had been telling me, you *have* to get on the Internet, there's this Dylan discussion group, it's insane! And so I did and discovered there was not only a discussion group, Rec.Music.Dylan, but a Dylan mailing list, Hwy 61, that would deliver Dylan news (mainly from the group) right to your inbox every few hours, and tons of websites that covered every aspect of Dylan, from roots and sources of songs, to religion, to lyric interpretations, to official rarities, to statistical sites about what songs were played where, when and how many times, and then finally an official site that featured both rare and new, live versions of songs. Later on there was the Dylan Pool, where you could bet on what songs would be played during a tour, and win prizes, which also featured among many other things a database where you could look up when a song was played. It seemed as if the Internet was made for Bob Dylan fans. You could meet people from all over the world and discuss Bob Dylan

In the early winter of '97, word leaked out that Bob Dylan was recording a new album in Miami with Daniel Lanois returning as producer. There was very little info about it. Every once in a while

mysterious persons would show up on the newsgroup, with little tidbits of info, maybe naming a musician or two, and promptly disappear. Then in the spring of that year, on the Friday of Memorial Day Weekend, leaving my job and turning on my car radio, I was hit with a news bulletin that Bob Dylan was in the hospital with a heart infection. I immediately recalled a day almost 31 years before when my brother came running across a field at camp to tell me Bob Dylan had been in a motorcycle crash. I sat staring for a minute, then drove home to find an answering machine full of messages and an full in-box of e-mails.

Bob Dylan returned to the road in August. Over the past couple of years he started bringing more never played or rarely played songs into the set, as well as an increasing amount of folk, blues and bluegrass songs. Among the never played songs was "Blind Willie McTell," and I kept going to shows until I finally saw it at Wolf Trap.

Sometime early in September, another an advance copy of *Time Out Of Mind* appeared in the mail. The album dominated by blues, with only four out of the 11 songs being ballads. The songs were brooding with a consistent theme of restlessness bordering on despair. Many people, not realizing when the album was recorded immediately confused Dylan's hospitalization with the album. The blues had always been a staple of Dylan's music starting with his first album, and Dylan always made his blues his own, minus the vocal affectations of many of his contemporaries. On *Time Out Of Mind*, there was a difference because unlike Dylan's earlier blues recordings, there was a conscious effort to get not only the sound, but the feel of the great blues records of the '50s.

Following the albums release, there were many articles and interviews, with Dylan and Lanois. But the one article that caught the fan's attention was an interview with keyboard player Jim Dickinson, where he mentioned two songs not on the album, "Mississippi" and "Girl From The Red River Shore." He then echoed a favorite cry of Dylan fans and collectors, "They left the best songs off the album." Fans were immediately intrigued even though they only had song titles to go on. "Mississippi" was of course re-recorded for *Love And Theft*, leaving "Red River Shore" something of a holy grail for collectors. Both songs are among the many high points of this set. My reaction on hearing "Red River Shore" was the same as when I first heard "Blind Willie McTell," this is the best Bob Dylan song in ages.

For his part, Bob Dylan told the *New York Times*, "Many of my records are more or less blueprints for the songs. This time I didn't

want blueprints, I wanted the real thing. When the songs are done right they're done right, and that's it. They're written in stone when they're done right."

Within a year, the onstage arrangements of many of those songs had changed considerably. Two of those changed arrangements are included here.

Dylan of course returned to the road and in addition to the songs from *Time Out Of Mind*, other songs were continually added to the set list, blues songs, country songs, bluegrass songs, songs he'd never played. A lot of people including myself would stay up until the set list appeared on the internet. Some music he dived into deeply, most notably The Stanley Brothers and the country duo, Johnny and Jack. You never knew when or where a new song would appear. It could be in Portugal, it could be in Wilmington. What was clear was that Dylan was not just performing, he was exploring and in doing so exposing his audience to all kinds of music they might not have known about. Once they heard it, or even heard about it, people wanted to know what it was, and where it was from. And usually there was someone on one of the various Dylan Internet forums who would know the answer. As a friend said to me recently, "I wouldn't have known about the Stanley Brothers if it wasn't for Bob Dylan." Simply by performing a song, Dylan did what the purveyors of the sixties folk "revival" always wanted to accomplish, without the didacticism, and, because of the Internet, the result was world-wide. He was, as he said in the film *No Direction Home*, a "musical expeditionary."

In the fall of 2,000, Dylan moved into an area, he'd only briefly touched before, jazz. In Dublin, he stunned the crowd at a club show with a dramatically rearranged "Tryin' To Get To Heaven." This was followed a few weeks later to an equally stunned crowd in Munster, when he pulled out "If Dogs Run Free," and a month after that, by a Western Swing song, "Blue Bonnet Girl." It was clear Bob Dylan was up to something. That something turned out to be his next album, *"Love And Theft"*, an album that was among many other things, an exploration of specific American roots-based music genres, an exploration that was continued five years later on *Modern Times*.

This, the eighth volume of *The Bootleg Series* isn't only about outtakes, alternate takes, and songs never heard. It's also about making the musical connections, connections that cover the wide canvas of American popular music. This is something that Bob Dylan has done not only during the 18 years this album covers, but for his entire career.

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